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Using Google Sites, or The Editor's Lament

Jeffrey Barlow
Pacific University

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Editorial by Jeffrey Barlow

One of the major problems facing a content oriented site like the Berglund Center for Internet Studies is dealing with the multiplicity of files of all types which must be processed. The work is distributed among many users and their computers. Keeping track of files as they evolve in production chains becomes quite complex. After more than ten years of evolution, we settled upon a Web 2.0 system, "Google Sites," as a solution.

The Berglund Center must not only deal with hundreds of files over a month, but our work force changes substantially on an annual basis, and it is our most experienced staff, our graduating seniors, who will leave us. We have slowly but surely learned how best to use "Sites" to solve our problems within the context of our own continually changing organization. Here we generalize from some of those lessons.

An article which eventually appears in *Interface*, may come to us through a process similar to what print editors called "over-the-transom." In "over-the-transom" a hopeful author simply tosses a hard copy through an open transom at editorial offices, probably after hours in order to avoid the agony of instant refusal: "Sorry, we accept only solicited pieces…"

At *Interface* our equivalent is over-the-Internet submission. As we are eager to review such contributions, we send an e-mail as soon as possible confirming our receipt and perhaps asking for some additional details about the author's authority and financial expectations, hoping that the former is very high and the latter, very low.

This exchange begins a process where a submission moves through the computers of several editors, perhaps also those of some external reviewers, then comes back with suggestions for changes. These suggestions are then communicated to the author—or authors<—>then sent back to us, and then put through copy editing, and then returned to the main editor for review.

Next it is sent to the HTML editor to be posted on the development server, and then posted to *Interface*. After that an editor must "click through" the article to check formatting, as must the author. Finally, after some commas are moved around once again, it will hopefully find an active life as it is read, noticed, and often copied across the Internet.

Now multiply this example by every piece, notice, announcement and review that goes into *Interface*, or any of the several other journals edited out of our offices.[1] Envision an office in which the staff are themselves writing, commenting, and perhaps shooting and editing video and posting it on You Tube and Berglund servers. These people are also trying to read and respond to at least twenty-five e-mails out of the several hundred that come into our offices daily, and make their classes, whether as a student or instructor. Now you might begin to understand why it is that editors are often said to be at hazard of, at least, alcoholism (and now there are so many new and interesting possibilities to be abused, including computer games) if not madness. Heh!

As complex as the process of distributed production can be, the ultimate problem is basic: How does one quickly determine what stage each file is in, where it must go next, and how to retrace each and every stage of the process when necessary?

We have been editing at either the Berglund Center or its predecessor, the Matsushita Center for Electronic Learning, (both out of Pacific University Oregon), since 1994 when we posted our first web pages in Asian Studies. At that time very little seemed to be at stake because it was extremely unlikely that anybody would read our postings anyway. Our first day's traffic was fifty visitors, and occured to us that we might be on to something.

In 1998, we founded and began editing *The Journal of the Association for History and Computing* and things started to get serious. We were soon dealing with articles coming from all over the world and guiding a "stable" of editors, (a metaphor which every editor will come to understand within a few moments of beginning to work) writing abstracts in French, German, Spanish, and occasionally Russian, Chinese, and Japanese.

Grant monies started coming in, including the generous gift of Jim and Mary Berglund, which created the Berglund Center, and a building to house it and other Pacific University functions. Then things were, by any definition, serious.

Once an editor has lost or misplaced a submission and dealt with an anxious author about to undergo some sort of review process, he or she realizes that the stakes are high, and keeping track of files becomes more than an interesting exercise. We began tracking and coordinating with note pads, then blackboards, then white boards, and now Excel sheets, (after flirtations with off-brand spreadsheets) the whole while being supported by yellow and then multicolored blizzards of sticky notes.

As the importance of the Internet grew, so, of course, did the tools available to us. We soon had

software that would open any conceivable document—and the inconceivable ones as well (Turkish versions of Word Perfect anyone?)–which came into our office, html editors grew larger and more user-friendly, and the capabilities of writing programs became more so as well.

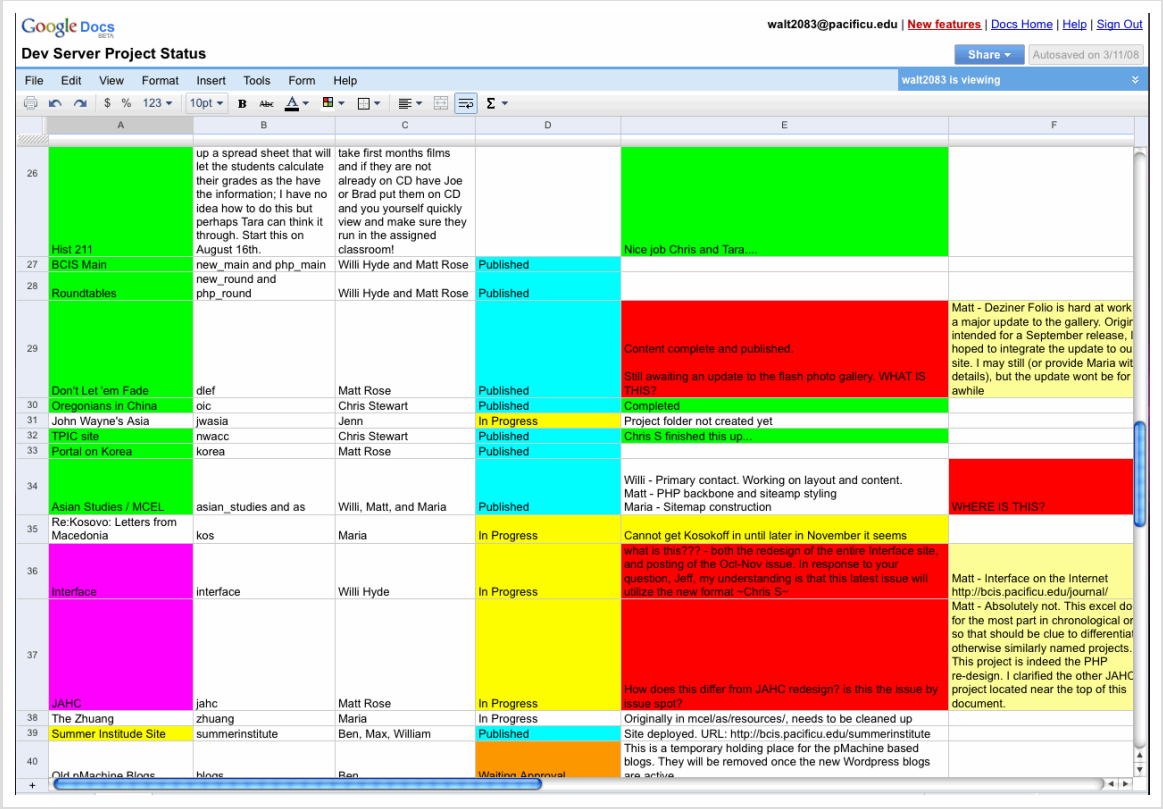
However, even with all the new technology and a dedicated staff, nothing really solved the main problem. Two complications remained. The underlying issue was the file metaphor itself. Everything was a file and each person who handled it was likely to change it at least minimally so the versions of everything multiplied with each click of a mouse. In addition, the distribution was essentially top down–I created documents and records and counted on steadily expanding numbers of staff members, who revolved on pretty much an annual basis–to familiarize themselves with the processes without themselves having any ownership.

The obvious answer to this problem, which various business have encountered on a far larger scale (not to mention all publishers) was to house files on a central server either internally or perhaps at a data farm. These solutions, however, were expensive, in terms of both equipment and manpower. They required at the least an in-house programmer/systems' operator of considerable ability and training. Also, as the movement of files multiplied so did the risk of security problems. In addition, staff came in wedded to the notion of the personal computer. We tried central file servers and found that their learning curve cost us too much in staff time and salaries.

Furthermore, as generous as grants were, our total annual budget, while permitting us to achieve prodigies, was well below that of almost any conceivable journal or publication with which we might be compared. At the Berglund Center we still have no full time employees. Even adding our professional part timers together, we still have less than two full timers, but, nonetheless, we usually remain high on the first page of the Google rankings for any activities for which we might be searched. However, simply adding more manpower multiplied the problem: more hands, more potential file changes.

Things changed recently, however, with the advent of Web 2.0. In essence, the Web itself is now a distributed project. Soon the possibilities offered by distributed projects called forth the solutions to our problems. Google both discovered and created the importance of distributed work as a consequence of the founders' insight that searching for *and finding* content was going to be the single most essential support function of the World Wide Web.[2]

Google then, for various good business reasons, began to provide free storage, and the tools necessary to work with files distributed across many different servers. Free applications began issuing from the "Googleplex" on what seemed to be a daily basis. One such was "Google Docs" which let us create files and store them on Google's servers while working with related software. [3]


Google Docs BETA walt2083@pacificu.edu | New features | Docs Home | Help | Sign Out

Dev Server Project Status

Share | Autosaved on 3/11/08

File Edit View Format Insert Tools Form Help walt2083 is viewing

	A	B	C	D	E	F
26	Hist 211	up a spread sheet that will let the students calculate their grades as the have the information; I have no idea how to do this but perhaps Tara can think it through. Start this on August 16th.	take first months films and if they are not already on CD have Joe or Brad put them on CD and you yourself quickly view and make sure they run in the assigned classroom!		Nice job Chris and Tara....	
27	BCIS Main	new_main and php_main	Willi Hyde and Matt Rose	Published		
28	Roundtables	new_round and php_round	Willi Hyde and Matt Rose	Published		
29	Don't Let 'em Fade	dlef	Matt Rose	Published	Content complete and published. Still awaiting an update to the flash photo gallery. WHAT IS THIS?	Matt - Deziner Folio is hard at work a major update to the gallery. Origir intended for a September release, I hoped to integrate the update to ou site. I may still (or provide Maria wit details), but the update wont be for awhile
30	Oregonians in China	oic	Chris Stewart	Published	Completed	
31	John Wayne's Asia	jwasia	Jenn	In Progress	Project folder not created yet	
32	TPIC site	nwacc	Chris Stewart	Published	Chris S finished this up...	
33	Portal on Korea	korea	Matt Rose	Published		
34	Asian Studies / MCEL	asian_studies and as	Willi, Matt, and Maria	Published	Willi - Primary contact. Working on layout and content. Matt - PHP backbone and siteamp styling Maria - Sitemap construction	WHERE IS THIS?
35	Re:Kosovo: Letters from Macedonia	kos	Maria	In Progress	Cannot get Kosokoff in until later in November it seems	
36	Interface	interface	Willi Hyde	In Progress	what is this??? - both the redesign of the entire Interface site, and posting of the Oct-Nov issue. In response to your question, Jeff, my understanding is that this latest issue will utilize the new format ~Chris S~	Matt - Interface on the Internet http://bcis.pacificu.edu/journal/
37	JAHC	jahc	Matt Rose	In Progress	How does this differ from JAHC redesign? is this the issue by issue spot?	Matt - Absolutely not. This excel do for the most part in chronological or so that should be clue to differential otherwise similarly named projects. This project is indeed the PHP re-design. I clarified the other JAHC project located near the top of this document.
38	The Zhuang	zhuang	Maria	In Progress	Originally in mcel/as/resources/, needs to be cleaned up	
39	Summer Institude Site	summerinstitute	Ben, Max, William	Published	Site deployed. URL: http://bcis.pacificu.edu/summerinstitute	
40	Old pMachine Blogs	blogs	Ben	Waiting Approval	This is a temporary holding place for the pMachine based blogs. They will be removed once the new Wordpress blogs are active	

With "Google Docs," we could locate files "in the cloud" even though we still could not afford a truly networked office or access to a data farm. However, problems remained. The learning curve for "Docs" was quite high, and some of our student staff proved either uninterested or unable to master its essential functions. It also seemed to our editors to be adding an additional layer of complexity to our chores as we tried to track changes.[4]

But two things happened: First, incoming students had begun to encounter distributed sites much earlier as the social uses of the web, (such as Facebook and You Tube) began to multiply, and our staff grew less resistant. Secondly, Google issued another related tool, "Google Sites."[5] Building on the Wiki format, which, thanks to Wikipedia, has become steadily more familiar, "Google Sites" was a whole other level of user-friendly.

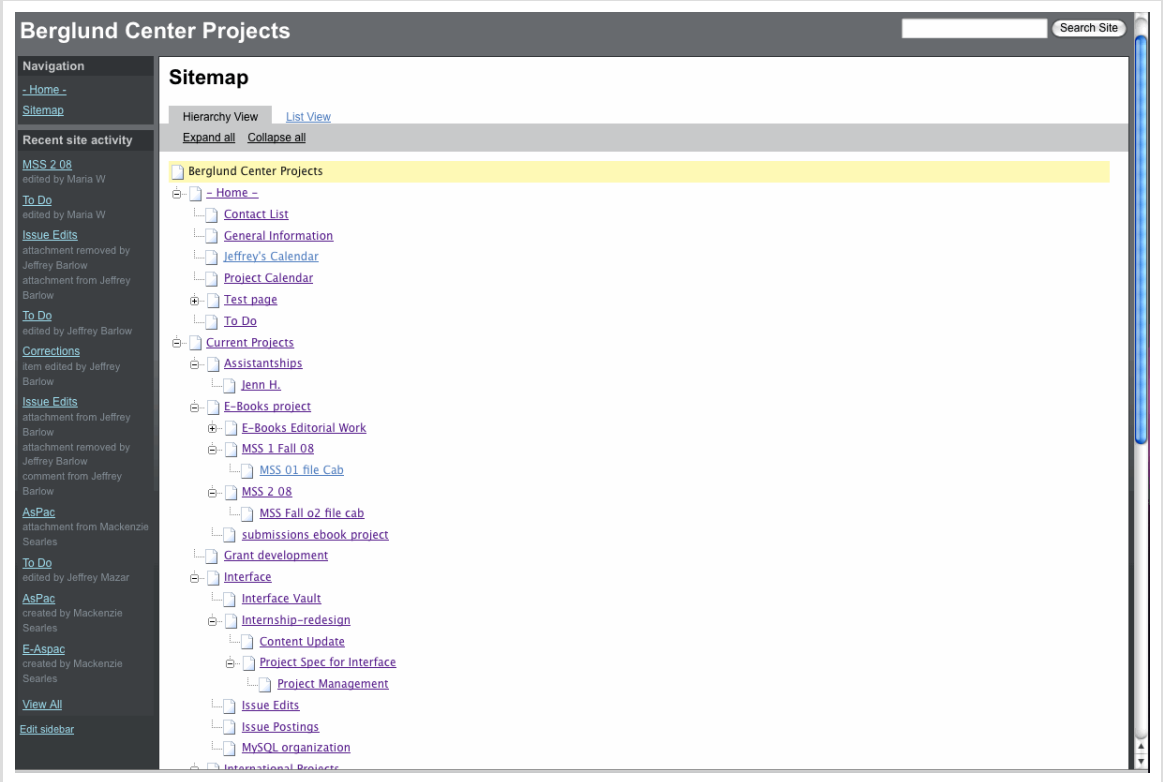
In the summer of 2008, Lynda Irons, a colleague from the Pacific University Library and an *Interface* editor, introduced me to "Google Sites" and we taught it to faculty groups in a two-hour block at a faculty workshop. It was immediately obvious that "Sites" was very easy to teach and to learn. The audience was delighted with it and by the second hour of our workshop, they were spinning off many uses creatively adapted to their own professional needs.

So our then Berglund Center Program Coordinator, Tara Fechter, and I designed a Google Site for the Berglund Center. We used it during 2008-09 and it served us very well. We were able to track files easily, call up previous iterations of materials, and invite authors and staff to work directly in the site. These dazzling uses developed rapidly. Our staff in that period, of course, saw it develop as we created it and, with some exceptions, took to it easily.

Then, however, Tara took another job that let her better employ her true love, mathematics. We were fortunate in hiring Theresa Floyd, one of the founders of the Berglund Center. Theresa is multi-talented, known on campus as the "Queen of the databases," and has considerable training in design and layout as well. She believes that using a mouse instead of memorizing keyboard commands and short cuts is inefficient. However, she found our Google Sites pages difficult to understand and use.

What we learned from these experiences has been critical. Tara and I had grown accustomed to the organization of "Google Sites" quite easily because of our previous familiarity with all of our operations at the Center. When a new problem arose, we solved it by creating a new page. Our staff of that period had adapted easily because they were present at the creation.

But new staff, even those as capable and experienced as Theresa, did not finds the organization of our Sites pages logical at all, but rather a buzzing, confusing maze which made no sense unless you were already familiar with all of our activities.



Any organization has certain inherent tensions. A key issue for any business, profit or non-profit, is the trade off between training and efficiency. It is best, when possible, to adapt the work to previously known staff skills rather than to try to adapt the staff, through training, to the work.

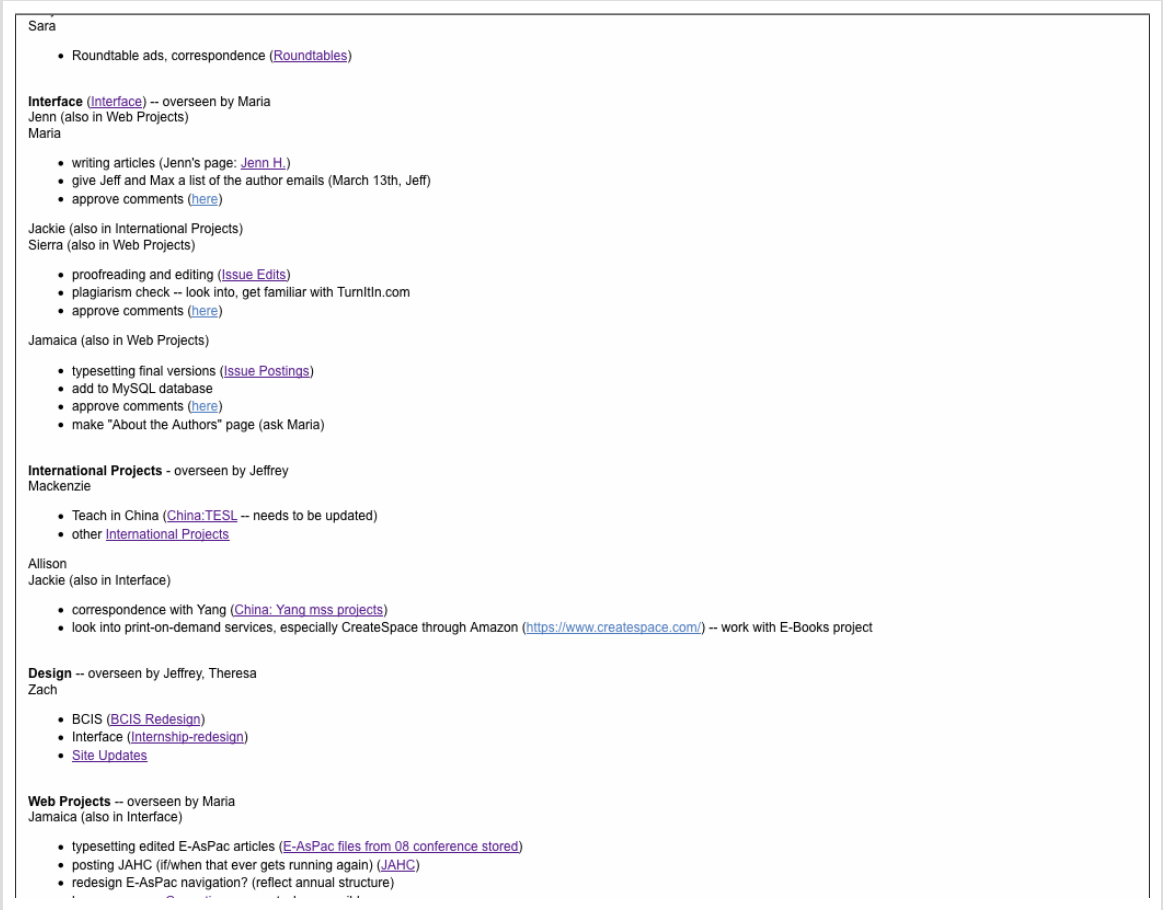
As long as we utilize, for example, the familiar programs of the personal computer and its web-based functions, our staff can quickly learn new ancillary skills. That is the genius of "Google Sites"; it uses the familiar directory and file structure and lets the user modify it, (using the page metaphor) to his or her needs.

But a complex organization, even one with fewer than fifteen staff members like our own, quickly develops communications problems. This underlying issue is that communication is not arithmetic but geometric. Two people have only two possible communications channels: A to B, and B to A, and because of the nature of interactive communications, really only one: A and B to each other, with exceptions noted below. Add C, however, and we now have not three but nine possibilities: A to B but not C; A to B and C; A to C but not B; B to A but not C, etc. Some of these sets are essentially duplicates, but given a hierarchical management structure, not necessarily so: A may tell B what B dare not tell A. Expand such an organization to fifteen members and the Tower of Babel reconstructs itself right in your own office.

Our problem, and perhaps yours, is that fifteen people communicating about one hundred files is more like the U.N.–without simultaneous translators–than like Babel. "Google Sites" was our solution.

We are now in a new stage of adapting it. This means, in part, despite the costs, adapting the staff to the work. As part of the process of our annual evolution at the Center, we watch our seniors graduate and in the past have largely waited for the following fall to hire their replacements. This saved us, of course, the expense of having two staff members for each position. This year we hired in the spring and each outgoing senior is training his or her replacement. Part of the training is not only familiarizing the new staff with informal office routines, but also learning to use "Google Sites." This has required, as in the lesson learned from Theresa's experience, acknowledging the reality of a constantly changing staff.

To meet this challenge, we re-organized the labs themselves, putting Maria Walters, formerly our HTML editor, in charge of the labs and all student projects. Maria, also a math major, is reorganizing "Google Sites" in the hopes of making it much more user friendly. Maria's first major change was to, once again, adapt the work to the staff. She observed that the first organizational iteration of our Google Sites, that, created by Tara and myself, attempted to adapt the staff to the work. Some members quickly became lost in the labyrinth of task-related pages. She superimposed a staff-centered structure which looks like this:



Sara

- Roundtable ads, correspondence (Roundtables)

Interface (Interface) -- overseen by Maria
Jenn (also in Web Projects)
Maria

- writing articles (Jenn's page: Jenn H.)
- give Jeff and Max a list of the author emails (March 13th, Jeff)
- approve comments (here)

Jackie (also in International Projects)
Sierra (also in Web Projects)

- proofreading and editing (Issue Edits)
- plagiarism check -- look into, get familiar with TurnItIn.com
- approve comments (here)

Jamaica (also in Web Projects)

- typesetting final versions (Issue Postings)
- add to MySQL database
- approve comments (here)
- make "About the Authors" page (ask Maria)

International Projects - overseen by Jeffrey
Mackenzie

- Teach in China (China:TESL -- needs to be updated)
- other International Projects

Allison
Jackie (also in Interface)

- correspondence with Yang (China: Yang mss projects)
- look into print-on-demand services, especially CreateSpace through Amazon (https://www.createspace.com/) -- work with E-Books project

Design -- overseen by Jeffrey, Theresa
Zach

- BCIS (BCIS Redesign)
- Interface (Internship-redesign)
- Site Updates

Web Projects -- overseen by Maria
Jamaica (also in Interface)

- typesetting edited E-AsPac articles (E-AsPac files from 08 conference stored)
- posting JAHC (if/when that ever gets running again) (JAHC)
- redesign E-AsPac navigation? (reflect annual structure)

So far, all indications are that for the first time we have a smooth transition and that our very complex production chains are being quickly learned, all within the framework of "Google Sites."

The lessons that we have learned in adapting "Google Sites" might be summarized as:

1. Create your Site not with a view to its use by current staff, but by any future staff member as well.
2. The organization of your Site needs to be staff-centric. That is, any given staff member needs to know right where to go to see their part in all production chains, no matter how complex. (See graphic immediately above).
3. The Sites pages also needs to give a hierarchical view of operations necessary for supervisors, such as in our case, myself, Theresa, and Maria, to track over all operations.
4. This hierarchical view also solves another problem encountered in complex production chains: staff members are naturally curious about what others are doing, and want to know how their job fits into the overall operation. Otherwise their tasks come to seem more laborious than creative.
5. Numbers 2) and 3) above solve an additional need: that for redundancy. There must be more than one channel to find each task. They also provide back up in the event of some catastrophe.
6. Supervising staff must regularly review the pages. This is, in part, because they will have to move files from page to page to ensure that the next stage of the process proceeds properly. In addition, if staff begins to feel that their work is not being observed, it soon

loses importance for them.

"Google Sites," as useful as they are, have some limitations of which any user should be aware. They are, after all, in the cloud–that is, in the distributed web of files which constitute the Internet. These files are not, when hosted by Google, in any specific single location. They are distributed across multiple computers, with broad redundancy. However, it has happened that at critical moments such as the forty-eight hours before we post *Interface*, "Google Sites" has been unavailable to us for hours at a time. This would not be a problem in most organizations as long as such incidents are foreseen, but our staff is part time. Some of our highly specialized video editors, for example, are only able to work on one high-end computer, and then only during certain hours each week when they are not in class or working, for example, at Fox News like our Video Production Manager, Steven Wong.

There is another potential limitation: security. Google itself feels that the massive size of its cloud precludes selective intrusions. That is, if I wanted to see your financial data, I couldn't effectively intrude into the Google cloud and reproduce the data from hundreds of different computers. However, some data, we feel, is too valuable to be entrusted to others' computers, and it is best not to put financial data or critical planning data onto Sites, however secure they are assumed to be.

Endnotes

[1] See http://bcis.pacificu.edu/journals.php for a partial list.

[2] See our review of David A. Vise and Mark Malseed's work, *The Google Story* at: http://bcis.pacificu.edu/journal/2007/02/vise.php to better understand this factor.

[3] See http://docs.google.com for Google Docs

[4] As the user reports at http://www.google.com/google-d-s/intl/en/tour5.html show, many others found them much more suitable than did we.

[5] http://www.google.com/sites/help/intl/en/overview.html

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2 THOUGHTS ON "USING GOOGLE SITES, OR THE EDITOR'S LAMENT"

Mike Argall
on **January 30, 2014 at 6:14 PM** said:

Someone essentially assist to make seriously posts I'd state. That is the very first time I frequented your website page and to this point? I amazed with the research you made to create this particular submit amazing. Magnificent task!

africa
on **February 4, 2014 at 10:21 AM** said:

it is always very good to see these info in your post, i was looking precisely the same but clearly there was hardly any correct resource, thanx now i've the connection that we wanted my research.